Unit focus: Underwater
Text focus: Information Text

STAGE 3

The Origin of Mermaids

Sailors have been reporting sightings of mermaids since the earliest civilisations. People in ancient Syria worshipped a goddess named Atargatis. Atargatis was often linked with fish and the harvest. She was sometimes considered to be the same as the goddess Ascalon. Ascalon had the head of a woman and the body of a fish.

More modern sailors often reported seeing beautiful ladies with tails like a fish swimming alongside their boats. In 1608, the famous English sea explorer, Henry Hudson, said that two of his men had seen a mermaid alongside their boat. She had long black hair, the body of a woman and the tail of a porpoise.

One explanation for mermaids is the manatee. Manatees are also called sea cows. They have a similar body shape to a human but are much larger. They have a tail like a whale. Another legend is that mermaids lured sailors to their death. Manatees live in shallow waters near to mangrove swamps. These waters are filled with mangrove roots and sharp rocks. It was common for boats to get stuck there. It would have been easy for superstitious sailors to believe that mermaids were responsible.

Mermaids have certainly inspired some of the most enchanting stories. The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Anderson is perhaps one of the most famous. The Ancient Greek myths contain stories of creatures called sirens who looked the same as mermaids and sang to sailors to entice them to their doom.

Even Britain has a history of mermaid tales. In 1737 CE, sailors near to Exeter rushed ashore to tell the world of a strange tale. When they hauled in their fishing nets, they discovered a “creature of human shape, having two legs”. All eight soldiers were interviewed on their own. They all told the same story. As soon as they arrived on land, the creature leapt from the net and ran away. They found it dying and “groaning like a human”. One said that it had webbed feet like a duck but the face of a man. It had a tail like a salmon and was roughly four feet high. Nobody has ever found out what it was that they caught that day. For the rest of their lives, they were convinced that it was a

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mermaid.

There were two more sightings of mermaids in Exeter in 1812 and 1823. In 1812, a fisherman claimed that he was lured out to sea by a beautiful song and saw a classical mermaid sat on a rock. In 1823, several fishermen claimed that they had seen creatures much more similar to the one in 1737.

There have also been legends of mermaids in Derbyshire. There is a salt-water pool named Mermaid's Pool that sits at the foot of a hill. It was once believed that anybody who bathed in the pool, at midnight, when it was Easter, would be granted eternal life by the mermaid who lived there.

Whether you believe in mermaids or not, they have certainly provided mystery and intrigue around the world.

SUMMARY FOCUS

1. Why might people confuse manatees with mermaids?
2. What did the creature do in 1737, after it came ashore?
3. In what ways was the 1737 mermaid different to traditional mermaids?
4. Summarise the evidence in the text that suggests mermaids exist.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V Find and copy a word from the text that tells you that stories about mermaids are often interesting.

R What is another name for manatees?

R Who wrote "The Little Mermaid"?

V Find and copy a word that means something lasts forever.

P Based on the evidence in the text, do you think that mermaids exist? Give reasons why you think this.

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